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# WHAT WILL THE 2008 OLYMPICS BRING TO CHINA'S PEOPLE?

By Liu Jingsheng

*The “green Olympics” and Olympics projects, in general, have developed into pretexts for infringing on the rights of ordinary citizens.*

The Olympics countdown billboards scattered throughout Beijing remind people that there is just one year to go before the Olympics begin. For the sake of those 20 days in August 2008, Beijing has endured five years of torment. In that respect, the countdown billboards reassure the people of Beijing that they have, at most, one year left to suffer.

Today, Beijing is one big construction site; everywhere one looks, the ground is torn up, and smoke and dust mix in the air. Particulates are especially dense near the Olympics stadium and along the major tourist routes. Subways are being rapidly built, roads are being repaired, old walls refurbished, hills made straight, pedestrian walkways repaved . . . The city is a forest of cranes competing to refurbish the exteriors of all major buildings under this most ambitious “image project” in the world, as China undertakes with great official fanfare the “final sprint to the Olympics.”<sup>1</sup>

Historically, cities hosting the Olympics have been located in industrially developed countries. The 2008 Olympics mark the first time that the Games are being held in a developing country, China—the “king of beggars” at this year’s China-Africa Forum. Amidst the massive demolition and construction projects for the Olympics, tumbledown shacks worthy of a Palestinian refugee camp lurk in the nooks and crannies of Beijing’s concrete jungle. The hungry moans of China’s poor are drowned out by the air being pumped into our bubble economy.

Having won its bid for the 2008 Olympics, Beijing feels

compelled to compete with its predecessors among developed nations by means of newly landscaped avenues and luxurious athletic stadiums. The environmental transformations needed for a “green Olympics” required a massive investment of \$1.5 billion, with ostentation and trickery on a similar scale. The sacking in 2006 of Liu Zhihua, Beijing’s deputy mayor in charge of capital construction, showed the world how easily the 2008 Olympics could breed millionaires among our bureaucrat-entrepreneurs.<sup>2</sup> The brothers Ye Guozhu and Ye Guoqiang, on the other hand, were early victims of the green Olympics, imprisoned in 2003 and 2004, respectively, after becoming part of the first contingent to petition against forcible eviction for Olympics construction.<sup>3</sup>

Just as China focused its resources on developing the atom bomb while millions starved during the 1960s, now Beijing is drawing on the nation’s resources to achieve its goals of “a green Olympics, a people’s Olympics, a high-tech Olympics.” The Water Cube, the Bird’s Nest, the new headquarters for CCTV, the national theater: investment for each one has exceeded 4 billion *yuan*.<sup>4</sup> More than a profligate drain on China’s labor and financial resources, this constitutes a reckless waste of nature’s bounty.

The ignorant might dream of basking in the glory of a strong nation, but hosting the Olympics does not a strong nation make; it cannot conceal the darkness in Chinese society, or raise the status of a nation that lacks human rights. In today’s China, boasting and bragging have become second nature after serving the purpose of impelling the Communist Party along its historical course, even as a new century driven by the tides of democracy is reducing the authoritarian Communist myth to a laughing stock.

China's social system has been taken over by vested interest groups: neither socialist nor capitalist, neither fish nor fowl, it has the body of a pig with the horns of a ram. There is no allegiance to anything but profit. Even before the furor over Shanxi's illegal brick kilns died away, news broke of cardboard-stuffed steamed buns being sold by hawkers in Beijing.<sup>5</sup> China's crisis of confidence and morals is evident everywhere. People have become dispirited, faithless, impetuous and disorderly. Society is no longer something people can depend on, and the government, by blocking human potential and releasing what is worst in human nature, has lost all legitimacy.

Only the Olympic Games can shift domestic attention away from all this—dissipating the incipient crisis and preserving the interests of vested interest groups. Without a doubt, this “relief Olympics” is a matter of life or

death to the Party-state, just as on June 4, 1989, the Party had to move forward at any price.

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On the evening of July 13, 2002, the first anniversary of Beijing's successful Olympic bid, the Politburo Standing Committee turned out in full force at the China Millennium Monument, while even greater numbers of patriotic youths surged out of their homes and into the streets as if possessed. In Tiananmen Square, thousands of fluorescent light sticks flickered like jack-o-lanterns: our version of the Olympic Torch? But for all the profit-seeking and endless grandstanding, there hasn't really

Preparing for the Olympics, Beijing has become one big construction site. Photo: Getty Images



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been anything worth celebrating in recent years. Even the euphoria from the successful Olympics bid was as transient as that from a Viagra tablet.

Designed to eliminate visual pollution, grandiose Olympics venues have actually created new visual pollution. The July 8, 2007, issue of *Jinghua Times* published a report describing how some 1,000 residents of the former Datun Village in Beijing's Chaoyang District were evicted for construction of a "green lung for the public welfare" in the vicinity of the main Olympic stadium, the Bird's Nest. Subsequently, some evicted residents accused the district government of administrative irregularities, and a local court has accepted the case. The *Jinghua Times* reporter found that most of the plots at the construction site of the "green belt" were actually being used for commercial exploitation: a golf course or luxury housing.<sup>6</sup>

This state media report clearly and unmistakably tells us that the 2008 Olympics are not only a reckless waste of nature's bounty, but have also become the means by which some local officials have legitimized exploitation of public interests. The construction projects of the 2008 Olympics are feeding the material and spiritual interests of vested interest groups. As for residents of the capital who have been forced to relocate, as well as laid-off workers, farmers who have lost their land, and urban residents who don't know where their next meal is coming from, who among them has any interest in paying hundreds of *yuan* for tickets to the Olympics? Who among them still cares about the waste of money and labor spent to create national honor in the form of Olympic gold medals?

Translated by J. Latourelle

The original Chinese article was posted on the Web site of ChinaEWeekly, [http://www.chinaeweekly.com/view\\_article\\_gb.aspx?vID=5743](http://www.chinaeweekly.com/view_article_gb.aspx?vID=5743).

## Notes

1. See "1 Year To Go" on the official Beijing 2008 Web site, <http://www.beijing2008.cn/1year/>. The official English translation does not use the word "sprint."
2. Liu Zhihua is alleged to have skimmed some 10 million *yuan* from Olympics construction projects. For summaries of articles about the Liu Zhihua case, and links to foreign and Chinese media, see the EastSouthWestNorth blog, [http://zonaeuropa.com/20060613\\_1.htm](http://zonaeuropa.com/20060613_1.htm).
3. Ye Guozhu, who had applied for legal permission to hold a protest march over forced evictions, was sentenced to four years in prison in December 2004. Ye Guoqiang was sentenced to two years in prison for disturbing social order after he attempted suicide by jumping into the Jinshui River near Tiananmen Square. See "China: Release Housing Rights Activist," Human Rights Watch, September 28, 2004, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/09/28/china9400.htm>.
4. The Water Cube is the nickname given to the National Aquatics Center, while the Bird's Nest is the nickname for the Olympic Stadium. Construction for the Olympic Stadium alone is estimated at \$450 million, or about 4 billion *yuan*. See "Beijing Olympic Venues—'Bird's Nest' and 'Water Cube'—Already Iconic," Associated Press, published in the *International Herald Tribune*, August 2, 2007, <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/08/03/sports/AS-SPT-OLY-Beijing-2008-Venues.php>.
5. The cardboard bun story was subsequently discredited as the invention of a television reporter. However, there is still some question over whether it might have been based on truth, and the fact that it was widely credited when first reported may also be indicative of something in Chinese society. See Keith Bradsher, "China Cracks Down on News Media as Party Congress Nears," *New York Times*, August 16, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/16/world/asia/16china.html?ref=world>.
6. "Zao tengtui jumin xiang fayuan tiqi susong [Evicted Residents File Suit in Court]," *Jinghua.com*, [http://epaper.jinghua.cn/html/2007-07/08/content\\_125772.htm](http://epaper.jinghua.cn/html/2007-07/08/content_125772.htm).